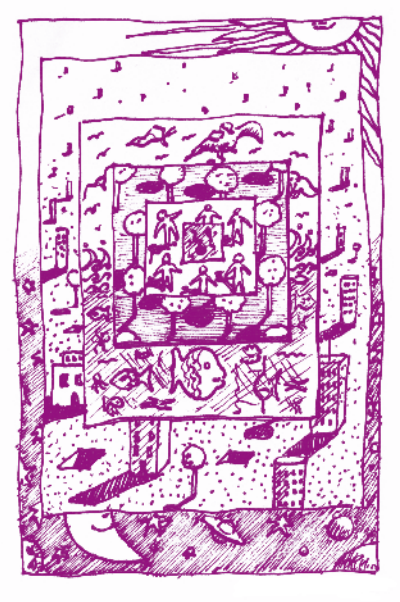

Flying over Las Vegas

by Stefano Marzano

PHILIPS

Flying over Las Vegas

In 1992, Stefano Marzano, CEO and Chief Creative Director at Philips Design, gave the keynote speech at the 17th World Design Conference of the International Council of Societies (ICSID) in Ljubljana. Under the intriguing title 'Flying over Las Vegas', he gave a vision of the task facing designers in the coming years. The text included in this book is adapted from that speech.

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A vision of the future

Some months ago, I was on board an airplane. Looking out of the window at the ground below, I could see the bright neon lights of a city standing in the middle of a desert. As you may already have guessed, its name was Las Vegas.

Today, activity in Las Vegas (which actually means 'the meadows' in Spanish - highly inappropriate!) is geared to the lust for money, a lust which is seldom satisfied. Money and materialism are the city's guiding principles; and this probably explains why most of the people who go there to play the slot machines seem to be so unhappy. On my own visit, I was confronted with an awesome vision of a future hell, a place or state of mind which recalled the writer Henry Miller's expression, "the air-conditioned nightmare."

This detailed description of Las Vegas is, I think, relevant, for it gives us a warning of what the future could be like - if we are not careful. It is the type of world to which environmental carelessness and materialism supported by technology could lead us. But it is not technology that determines human destiny, but rather people themselves, in how they decides to use this technology. The future does not just happen by itself. It can be influenced by those who are prepared to shoulder the responsibility of making decisions today. Inaction
is also action.

The future, then, is made by those who take responsibility for it today. That means that we, too, can participate in the shaping of this future. By virtue of the enormous number of products they put onto the market, large companies play a major role in determining the quality of our lives. Such corporations should therefore shoulder their responsibility and become conscious of their power. Those of us who work for them must play our part in this.

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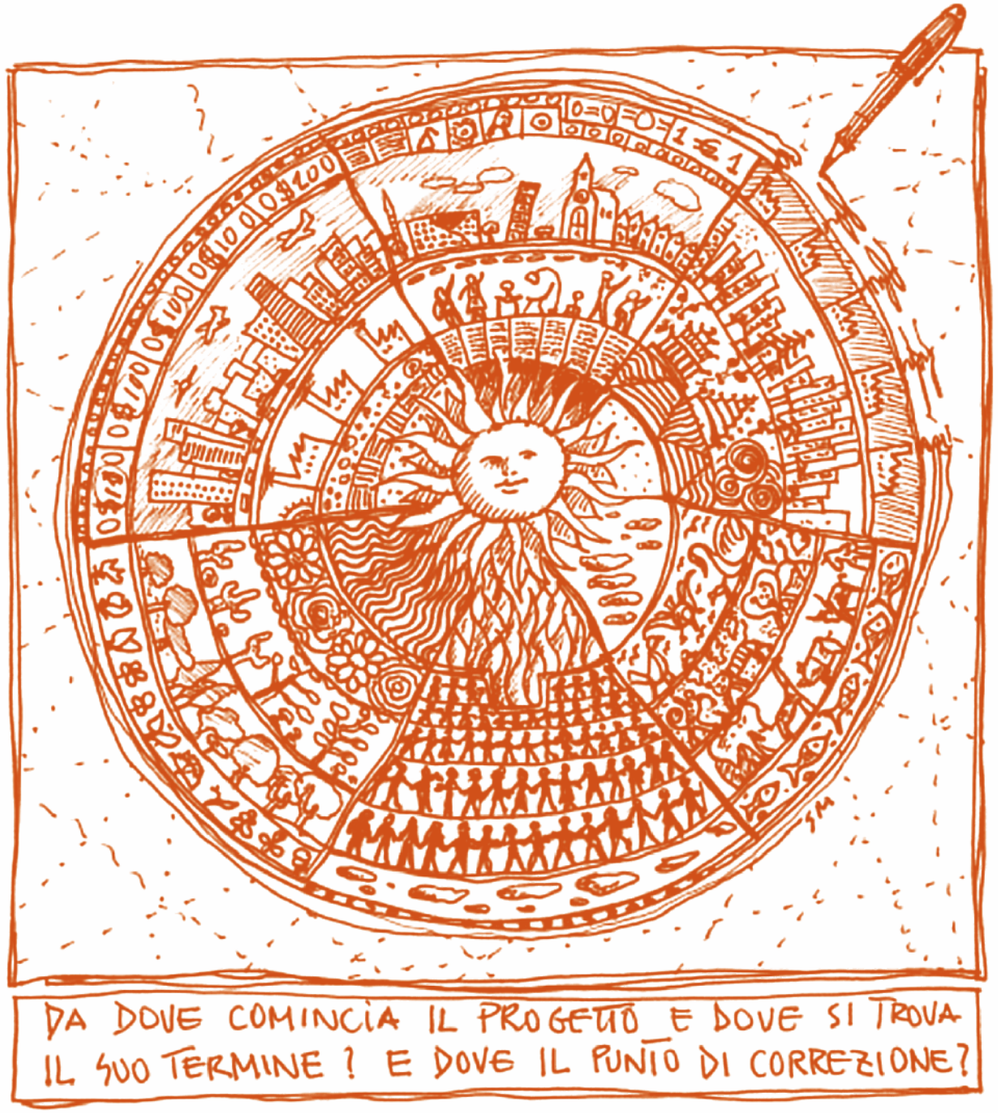
The New Order

Many different challenges are confronting the human race. No-one can deny that the last few years have seen dramatic changes in political, social, economical and environmental terms; and we are all naturally somewhat apprehensive about the future. We are discovering new local, ethnic and regional groupings; and this helps to explain the current crises of national identity. The old system prevented us from realizing that, instead of belonging to either the East or the West, we are in fact members of a global community. We were prevented from seeing that the problems of this community must be solved on a global basis.

Saturation Point

We are constantly being bombarded by messages - from advertising and the news media - that slowly but surely are ceasing to have any meaning. A similar glut of information is apparent in the products we use. They confuse us with their vast number of functions and, again, their seductive exterior merely covers a void. It is this void, or silence, which prevents us from entering into any meaningful relationship with the product: we are unable to 'feel' the object, just as we are unable to cope with the mass media images. In both cases, the effect is one of mental pollution: as with environmental pollution, the fundamental cause is an undue emphasis on quantity at the expense of quality.

Parallel to the fragmentation of community loyalties we are witnessing around the world, we are also seeing a segmentation of consumer loyalty. Today's consumers are increasingly individualistic. Whereas they once fell into clearly defined national, cultural or social groups (e.g., the yuppies) and acquired products (often status symbols) in order to affirm their membership of one of these groups, today they are transversal in their behavior. They will cross the social group boundaries several times during the course of the day. A highly rational purchase will be followed by a piece of impulse buying. They will eat in a luxurious restaurant one day and in a cheap pizzeria the next; wear an expensive Rolex watch along with jeans and sneakers. The consumer is moving away from group style towards individual style. The customer has become less predictable.



Values which will promote humanity's cultural growth

The Unlimited Market

In both the political and the consumer scenario, chaos is the new order. And yet, far from being pessimistic about this situation, I am actually optimistic. If our limited market has now reached saturation point, and the metaphorical wall has been knocked down, then the next logical step is the unlimited market. And this, I believe, is a far more exciting place to be.

In the past, the emphasis was on quantity: products were impressive for their number of functions, the number of gears or the number of programs. The car was judged on its speed, the stereo system for its volume, and so on. It is perhaps because of this quantitative, materialistic approach that we have now reached the limits to growth. Concentration on quantity is therefore no longer possible. Instead, we must shift to quality. We must focus on the 'soft' values - the aspects which will make the consumer experience richer and more meaningful. They are the values which will promote humanity's cultural growth.

The American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow (1908-1970) was someone who had great faith in our capacity for cultural growth. He devised a theory of what he called self-actualization. Self-actualization he saw as the ultimate plane of human awareness, and achieving it was like climbing a ladder. At the bottom rung or lowest level were such basic requirements as food and shelter. Only when individuals were secure in these would they be able to progress to a higher level, to such concepts as independence and autonomy, friendship, love and esteem. When, in turn, these had been achieved, Maslow argued, the individual could ascend to the highest level of all, that of self-actualization.

Although Maslow is no longer with us, I feel we can learn much from his view of the world. We can, to paraphrase him, seek to develop 'design for the peace table'. And the way to do this is to make sure we create relevant objects. By relevant objects, I mean products that will enable the individual to climb the rungs of Maslow's ladder. These are products which use technology to encourage the individual's cultural growth, that promote the amplification of the senses and the individual's power. The rapid advances being made in design technology are such that I believe this is genuinely possible.

The Other Half

We must not ignore the non-triad countries or, indeed, the poorer sections of the triad countries themselves. Much of the world's population lives in poverty, and daily life is devoted to satisfying very basic requirements on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In the developing countries, the consumer has yet to reach saturation point. Such countries still need to grow in quantitative and qualitative terms. Yet, as these countries endeavor to 'catch up', we must try to help them so that they learn from the mistakes that have been made in the triad countries. Somewhere along the way, the relationship between the consumer and the product has gone wrong. There is considerable disaffection with products that are overdesigned and overcomplicated. Short and wasteful life-cycles have just enlarged this sense of distance. The old 'affection' for products has been lost: instead, the dominant feeling is one of alienation. We must ensure that the same thing doesn't happen in the non-triad countries. In the industrial triad, we must use available technology to restore the relationship between the consumer and the product. We must seek to create a design strategy which will improve the quality of life in both types of society.

The Race against Time

Modern times have been dominated by speed and acceleration. The implications have been enormous and diverse. The explosive problem of the environment, too, is largely a product of the amazing acceleration of time (and consequently also of the processes of production and consumption) that has taken place in recent history. This same acceleration of time is at the root of the cultural crisis our society is going through, as well as the cause of our increasingly superficial and banal relationship with objects.

But from crises we can look to opportunities. We must therefore reconsider the value of time. We must go beyond the myth of velocity. The entire complex machine of production and consumption must be slowed down. We have to take time to enter into a relationship with people and things: time to do things carefully, considering the implications of our choices; time to think, to contemplate, to savor; time to give meaning to our lives and what we are doing. In opposition to this impoverished and wasteful type of relationship with objects, let us propose a shift in objectives. We could suggest that we begin to work to achieve not, as before, a minimum of effort, but a maximum of quality. A quality of relationship that requires attention and care.

Relevant Objects

In order to realize this, a radical change in approach is necessary. If we are to provide relevant honest and reliable products for both the developed and the developing world, then we must promote relevant, honest and reliable design.

This also raises the question of ethics, a concept that has been sadly ignored in recent years. No matter who our consumers may be, we must try to give them relevant value for money. We need to abandon our obsession with adding extra functions or fancy gadgets to products. Instead we must enhance the quality of the consumer experience by making products easier to use. At the same time we must give back products their old dignity. Why, for example, does wood age gracefully, while plastic does not? I suspect it has something to do with the all-too-brief life-cycle of today's products. We need to replace the 'use and throw away' mentality. We must make products more 'user-friendly'. By this, I don't just mean making them easier to use, but restoring the traditional sense of friendship between consumer and product.

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Environmental challenge

The emergence of the entire environmental issue puts these lines of thought and areas of research into a broader perspective, linking them to a range of cultural, social and manufacturing problems. At the same time, it provides design culture with a remarkable opportunity. This is: to accept the limitations that the environment imposes on the current system of production and consumption, and to come up with a completely new set of solutions, based on new criteria for quality, indeed, for new qualities, which will stimulate.

To develop relevant objects in this context, we also need some new design strategies. The best-known and most important of these include:

Clean cycles

The strategy of 'clean cycles' embraces the entire life-cycle of products - production, distribution, use and disposal. It includes an extensive range of interventions involving problems in the field of manufacturing ('clean technology'), problems in the method of evaluation ('eco-accounting') and problems of certification ('seals of environmental quality').

Assembly and disassembly

The strategy of 'assembly and disassembly' is directed at the manufacture of products which, when they have reached the end of their useful life-cycle, can be dismantled and broken down into parts which can then be used in new cycles of production. This strategy requires that materials need to be carefully selected and designed so that complex products, whose components are made of different materials, can be easily broken down into homogeneous parts.

Durability

The goal of 'durability', the creation of relevant objects with lower environmental impact, can be pursued by either making objects which, though only moderately durable, are nonetheless highly recyclable; or we can extend the life-cycle of products, i.e., develop a generation of products which will continue to function for a very long time.

Miniaturization

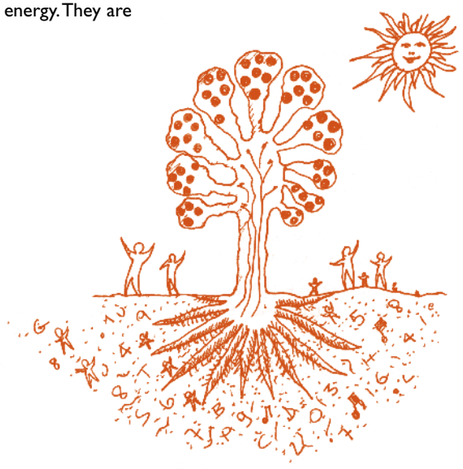
The strategy of 'miniaturization' is aimed at the realization of relevant objects of environmental impact through a reduction in the amount of material and energy needed to obtain the desired results. The practicability of this strategy is closely linked to the availability of high-performance materials and technologies.

Usability

Today, the strategy of 'usability' focuses on the creation of relevant (i.e., highly usable) products which enhance people's comfort, satisfaction, pleasure and productivity, with local responsiveness to (individual) cultures. This depends on the user-customer being involved in the product creation process.

Service Carriers

The strategy of products as 'service carriers', one of the most important trends in the modern system of manufacturing and consumption, entails the replacement of physical products with software products - in a word, services. What is important in the present context is the prospects they offer of providing information and services which directly result in reduced consumption of matter and energy. They are no longer products 'for consumption' but providers of services 'for use'.



New products must be compatible with those that came before and with those that will follow

Interdependency

If they are to address the High Complexity the world is confronting us with, the strategies described above must support each other. In fact, there is a direct correlation between High Complexity and interdependency. No company these days can develop a product or a process without the support of another. A car manufacturer, for example, is dependent on the chemicals firm which provides his materials, and vice versa. Similarly, within a single company, there is interdependency between different competencies, such as engineering and marketing. Developments take place simultaneously: the linear model has vanished. New products must be compatible with those that came before and with those that will follow.

High Complexity design is no longer a case of clever individuals or teams creating products in splendid isolation, but of multidisciplinary organizations or networks creating ‘relevant qualities’ and ‘cultural spheres’. If we are to make the quantum leap from the limited materialistic and quantitative market to the unlimited, more spiritual and qualitative market, then we must provide the design worthy of it.

In order to meet all the challenges facing us as a community, we have to adopt sustainable strategies

Etica Nova

In order to meet all the challenges facing us as a community, we have to adopt sustainable strategies; we have to adopt High Design processes. But more than anything else, we have to create and adopt an Etica Nova. A new ethic as the driving force behind all we do, an ethic which incorporates universal values such as Love, Brother/Sisterhood and Peace. I would also add Ecology to this list - not merely in the sense of 'environment', but in its deeper meaning of 'harmony between the elements', both in the artificial world we construct and in the natural world around us.

These noble sentiments may appear incompatible with the concerns of a modern, profit-making company; and here, I think, lies our greatest challenge. Many of us work (or will work) for large companies. We are, at the same time, concerned about the quality of our lives and that of our children. But there need be no contradiction here. We are in a position to convert the companies we work for to a more ethical design philosophy; and we can do this by making the quality of life a competitive issue. Products must compete in terms of their capacity for improving the quality of Man's domestic and working environment and for promoting Man's self-actualization. It is this, rather than quantitative, redundant gadgetry, which must become the key to the future.

The technology we need to do it is available. In fact, technology is not the challenge: it is the way we apply it. We must use technology as a force for 'Good' rather than 'Evil'. It is possible: we can create a 'landscape of happy objects', a harmonious, peaceful Paradise Regained - rather than the hell I described in my opening remarks.

This article was first published in 1992 as Flying over Las Vegas

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